

Margaret Olley Art Trust Collection Study Room Residency Artist in Residence Written Reflection

Jodie van de Wetering, 2024

No ask, no get

Advice for humble colleagues

You have a ditto
A parallel self
Call them an evil twin if it helps

They're not evil, they're just not you.
And they rate themselves
As much as you hate yourself

And all the things you can't bring yourself to ask for
They openly enjoy

While you tell yourself you don't have that kind of talent
That education
That experience
That connection
You're just not all that...

They're asking for the grant
Applying for the residency
Entering the competition
Approaching the mentor
Expressing their interest
Submitting the tender
Grabbing the opportunity
And sucking it down raw like a fresh oyster squirming in the shell

That's why they're getting ahead
While you're getting nowhere

Someone will get that chance
If you don't ask
Your ditto will
And they will get it

The worst that can happen is "no"
And you're no worse off than you started.

For the love of all that matters
Ask.

Rex Pilbeam: Time Traveller

If a dinosaur could see the future, could it grow feathers and fly?

We all deserve to be cancelled. We say and do problematic things, and even when we mean well we may hurt the people around us. At what point is a person beyond redemption, and when do we deserve space to grow, and the chance to do better when we know better?

As our understanding of the world and each other changes faster than ever before in human history, how important is it to extend grace to the people taking a while to catch up?

Which brings us to Rex Pilbeam, Mayor of Rockhampton from 1952 to 1982. During his record 30 years in office he dragged Rockhampton kicking and screaming into the 20th century, with paved roads, modern sewerage, a reliable water supply, infrastructure to support the community's sporting and cultural life, and what is now one of the best art collections in regional Australia with an estimated value of \$15 million dollars.

But some of Pilbeam's actions reflect his roots in a bygone age. Until the late 1970s married women could not work for the Council he ran, and he courted scandal and controversy throughout his career.

Rex Pilbeam: Time Traveller is a new play blending historical fact with speculative fiction, examining how our worldview fuels our actions and how that can change when we discover new ideas. It takes Pilbeam for a wild romp through time from his heyday as Mayor to the present day and into a dystopian future where he may be the key to saving his precious city of Rockhampton from impending disaster.

The concept for *Rex Pilbeam: Time Traveller* has been rattling around in my head for several years, and I finally wrote the full first draft during my month as Artist in Residence at Rockhampton Museum of Art in October 2024. I think that long gestation was an overall benefit, since the concept in its current form is much more developed and interesting than my original idea, which was to be a jukebox musical treatment of Pilbeam's life story.

From here I'll work with a dramaturg to refine the script into something ready for the stage, in hope of seeing it in production in 2026.

The Selected Works

The cornerstone of the works I selected for display during my residency was William Dargie's 1977 *Portrait of Rex Pilbeam*. Who better for company while spending a month writing a play about the man himself, albeit a fictionalised version in a magic realism setting?

Rex Pilbeam: Time Traveller challenges some of Pilbeam's ideas and actions while maintaining great affection and respect for the man himself, recognising that everyone is a product of their time. To show that challenge in the physical space of the study room, Pilbeam's portrait was hung opposite another mayoral portrait: *Margaret Strelow in the new Museum of Art* (2022) by Michael Zavros.

The rest of the selection reflected the history of Rockhampton and Rockhampton's art collection, and the themes and mood of the play itself in either literal or symbolic ways.

My residency is the first time on display for one of RMOA's newer acquisitions. Harold Lane's *Expectant Father*, showing a rooster keenly observing a hen sitting on eggs, was bequeathed to the collection last year. This work's inclusion is a pun on Pilbeam's infamous statement likening women fighting for the right to equal employment to "a hen that thinks she is a rooster".

The Value of the Residency

Writing might seem like a very convenient artform, requiring nothing more than a pen and notebook or a mobile phone, able to be done in snippets in between day jobs, family care, and the everyday business of life. It doesn't need a lot of space, specialist equipment, or time for the paint to dry.

But tackling a larger writing project - like a full-length play - is difficult to do piecemeal in between other things. Having space to work, both physically and mentally, makes a huge difference. The luxury of a month away from my usual routine and responsibilities has been instrumental in getting this project to its current stage of development. Being able to devote time to exploring the history and themes of the play more deeply has made this a richer, better constructed piece of work than it would otherwise be. I've spent much of the month 'living' in the world of the play's setting, and having mental conversations with the characters, all of which has helped get more polished, coherent ideas on the page.

I cannot thank Rockhampton Museum of Art, Rockhampton Regional Council, and Hayman's Electrical enough for their support. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to see this project through, and to learn more about the craft of writing, local history, goings-on at RMOA, and Rockhampton's stunning art collection. Thanks also to Easton and the RMOA team, who have been so very welcoming, and generous with their time, knowledge and support. This residency has been a joy, and I very strongly encourage other artists - of any kind - to consider applying. It is an incredibly valuable experience.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: Good Morning

Rockhampton, 1970s, outdoors on the street near the Council Chambers. REX is walking to work. He greets people as he goes, friendly to everyone. The people may be unseen, represented by sound or lighting effects, or played by the rest of the cast in quick rotation with dialogue ad libbed to suit.

REX

Morning Bishop! Jerusalem, eh? Hell of an adventure. When do you leave? We must catch up about that art gallery idea when you're back.

Morning Con, what's good today? Oh, those are some good lettuce. Finest from the farms out at Frenchville.

Morning Mrs Archer, how's the old boy? Oh, go easy on the old coot, he's doing his best. Pick him up a lettuce, Con's got some beauties in.

Morning Sally, what's new at the library? Eileen, ey? Who's the lucky gent? Next June? Good for her, be a shame to lose her.

Morning Bert, how's Rockhampton's finest garbologist? Good, good. Keep up the good work, couldn't do it without you.

Morning Herb! Up for a flutter this weekend? Going to be a fast track if this weather keeps up.

Exit REX.